



BOND STREET THEATRE

peacebuilding, empowerment & healing through theatre

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Creative Arts Prison Program

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Organization Name: Bond Street Theatre
Program Title: Creative Arts Prison Program
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2. Recap briefly what outcomes the program was designed to achieve.

The *Creative Arts Prison Program* (CAPP) was designed to give women, who have been deeply debilitated by tragic life experiences, compounded by the inequities of the Afghan justice system, healing activities to release anger and stress, a safe environment to discuss issues, and the motivation to take control of their lives and speak out for justice. In addition, the program was designed to present stimulating and creative activities that the women can share with their children who are incarcerated with them.

As a result, participants gain the mental and emotional strength to manage their lives while in the prison and shelters, improve their self-esteem and self-reliance, and help them be better poised for successful re-entry into society upon release.

The overarching **goal** of the CAPP is to incorporate effective theatre-based programming into the rehabilitative process for women and girls in the Afghan justice system, and make these methods widely available to prisons and outreach facilities throughout Afghanistan. To that end, the CAPP conducted the following activities:

- a. Training our Arts Partner, Simorgh Theatre of Herat, an all-female theatre group, in theatre-based practices that aid prison and post-incarceration populations;
- b. Improving the life skills of incarcerated women and girls by presenting a structured program that improves their mental and physical health, expands their imagination and problem-solving skills, and builds their motivation and self-esteem to ease their reentry into society;
- c. Providing creative and healing activities for incarcerated women to enjoy with each other and with their children;
- d. Training women in the prison to teach these methods to others to ensure program continuation.
- e. Conducting the program in four facilities: the Herat Women's Prison (140 women ages 18-85 years), the Juvenile Correction Center (13 girls under 18), the Child Support Center (78 children of inmates, age 7 and older, male and female), and the OMID Women's Shelter (15-20 formerly incarcerated women). (Numbers refer to population at any one time, not totals over time.)
- f. Providing new information for management staff, psychologists, teachers, and guards at each facility through their observing the program and its positive effects on the participants.

3. What was accomplished in connection with this project?

The CAPP has been a thoroughly successful program in improving the mental and physical health of many incarcerated women and their children throughout the four facilities. Our four objectives as noted in our proposal are:

- 1) To train our local Arts Partners in effective theatre-based practices that promote conflict resolution and community building in women's prisons and post-incarceration environments;
- 2) To introduce a comprehensive program designed to improve communication skills, self-confidence, critical thinking, and problem solving in incarcerated populations to ease re-entry into society;
- 3) To provide creative activities for incarcerated women and children to participate in together;
- 4) To train local trainers in these techniques to ensure a replicable and adaptable program.

Objective 1) Training our Arts Partner, Simorgh Theatre of Herat:

We conducted a nine-day training for ten members of Simorgh Theatre of Herat, six women and two men, focusing on developing a curriculum of theatrical exercises that can best be applied to the issues of incarcerated women and girls. We then directed six women from the group in a play titled *The Backbiters*, a story about a 13 year old girl who is about to be married against her will to an older man for a large sum of money. The six women play all the roles, including the male roles. We presented the play at each facility as a way to introduce the idea of story-telling and theatrical performance. We followed the play with a short demonstration of some of the workshop exercises that we would be teaching.

The performances were also followed by a structured interactive session with the audience during which they were invited to go onstage, speak directly to the characters, and act out their ideas for solutions to the issues presented in the play. In the Women's Prison, about 90 women gathered to see the performance out of the 140 women. During the post-performance interaction, the women did not hesitate to speak out. Many stood up to talk about their own personal circumstances. Others got on stage to confront the characters in the play. All the women spoke with great passion. It was clear that the play resonated with them.

One woman got onstage to confront the abusive father who was determined to "sell" his daughter. She reprimanded him for marrying off his daughter so young, to which the father said, *"Everyone in my family married at 13; what's the problem?"* The woman retorted, *"That's why we are all here!"* gesturing to the audience. The women all exclaimed, *"Yes, that's why we're here!"* In fact, most of the women had been married at 14 or 15 years old, and suffered years of abuse.

Next, we selected two actors from the Simorgh Theatre troupe, Fariba Baqeri and Masouma Adell, and gave them additional training in curriculum development and in conducting workshops for children and women in prison environments. The two women had some prior experience in leading workshops and natural leadership abilities, which made them good choices to take leadership roles for the duration of the project.

The two successfully ran all the programming in the Women's Prison, Juvenile Correction Center, Omid Women's Shelter and the Child Support Center. We are fortunate to now have two people trained to conduct further projects in the women's prison system and elsewhere.

One male member of Simorgh Theatre, Mohammad Ahmadi, helped with the general organizing of the project and handling meetings with officials as necessary.

Objective 2) Improving life skills toward successful reentry into society:

The workshops in the Women's Prison always started with a good warm-up to give the group energy and release their physical and mental tension, followed by group games, trust exercises, physical challenges, and sports. Being in prison is a tremendous stigma on the women, and subjects them to scorn from their families, neighbors and society at large. Most of the women suffer deep, ongoing depression. But the despair and pain disappears from their bodies when they engage in the exercises and games. Many women told us that they never played as a child, and this is their first chance they have had to enjoy the freedom of play.

We witnessed great improvement in the women's sense of worth and their ability to relax, focus and imagine. The creative release and fun the program provides allows the women to have a fresh perspective on their lives and see the potential for a better future. They gain a new level of confidence that they never thought they had.

This is evident in the observation of trainer Fariba Baqeri: *“Participating in the workshop has affected the women a lot. I can see that their spirit is lifted and they are happier, with more energy and self-confidence. Many are ready to work now.”*

Parisa, one of the women in the prison told us: *“I have so much anxiety, I get angry all the time. “Doing these games my friends are happy and energetic. You can see yourself how happy we are.”*

In the OMID Women's Shelter, for women who have been released from the prison but cannot return to their homes, the women still live with the stigma of prison but can now live in peace. This shelter, run by Women for Afghan Women, is one of three in Herat, but the only one solely for formerly incarcerated women. The work we did with them directly related to how to deal with the outside world. For these women, we created a solid program of exercises and role play to improve their communication skills, body language and self-confidence for facing the public.

All of the workshops for women focus on self-expression, imagination, problem-solving and teamwork to bring the group together and dispel any backbiting between them. As the year went on, the workshops started focusing more on story-telling and making small sketches that eventually became full plays written with the women's own words.

We started to discuss their problems in a safe and open way through an exercise called the **Problem Tree**. A simple outline of a tree is drawn on a large piece of paper. The leaves represent problems, large and small, and as the women name them, we write them on the paper. The trunk of the tree is the system that supports these problems. The women identify these societal structures, such as the unequal justice system in which a woman's testimony is worth only half a man's. The roots represent the deepest origins of the problems, such as the age-old traditions and bad customs that are hard to change. The tree presents a clear picture to guide a discussion of the issues that affect their lives, and an examination of what holds these problems in place.

Then we begin to make images or tableaux that illustrate these problems, or **Image Theatre**. In this exercise, the women create a visual depiction of a problem in three still images or “photographs”: first, an image illustrating the issue; second, an image depicting the result if the situation continues; and third, an image showing a possible solution to the problem. For example, the first image may show a woman with a sick child trying to read a medicine bottle; the second shows the tragic results of an improper dosage because the women could not read; and the third shows the woman enrolling in a literacy course. From these small sketches, they began to construct a play based on their own stories combined, with a choice of solutions to the problems.

Objective 3) Providing creative activities for the children and youth:

There are 75 children in the Herat Women's Prison, all under the age of five, and most of them are babies. Breaks for nursing punctuate every workshop. The children, although small, are entranced by the activities and watch intently, even the very young ones, and imitate everything they see. The toddlers often join in alongside their mothers. The time the children spend with their mothers playing and learning in the workshops is clearly some of their most enjoyable moments.

At age seven, the children either return to the family home or, if not possible, they go to the Child Support Center. Our program has been especially successful among the children at the Child Support Center, with the highest rates of attendance and enthusiasm in each class. There are 82 children currently in the Center, which is clean and well-run by Women for Afghan Women. The children seem genuinely well-cared for. They visit their mothers once every week or two.

We asked the Manager of the Child Support Center, Mrs. Zahra Hamnabard, if she would like our program to continue and why:

Yes! The children are here alone; their mothers are in prison, and children's behavior is not very good. They are not happy and always have problems. Your program is very useful for their energy and morale. Now they are so happy and they don't have time for sorrow.

The children at the Center clamored for our workshops. The positive effects on the children's attitudes and personalities were dramatically evident here. The most distraught and secluded children came out of their shells. The children picked up every skill very quickly, and created a show with well-acted characters and memorized lines with no prompting. The trainers were greeted with smiling, excited children every workshop day.

Most important, they continued the games and exercises and acting long after the trainers left, and still continue even now that the program is finished. The staff remarked that they always practice by themselves, including the most isolated and sad ones. Trainer Masouma Adell noted: *The acting allows the children to create a happy world that they make for themselves. Now they have made several shows and are our most active group of all. They could perform their shows in different places.*

Similarly, the young women (ages 14 to 17) at the Juvenile Correction Center gathered around us when we entered the facility, vibrant with enthusiasm and anticipation. The Juvenile Correction Center looks more like a prison than the Women's Prison: a large metal gate with bars leads to a corridor lined with heavy metal doors with small barred windows. Fortunately, the doors are kept open and the girls can freely come and go between their cells.

All of the girls are in prison for having had sexual relations outside of marriage. At least four of the girls are victims of rape, although they failed to "prove" to the courts that they were not willing partners. In the workshop, most of the girls started out shy and visibly traumatized, getting a little braver with each workshop. By the end, they were creating and performing short sketches of their own design, and showing us what they created amongst themselves in between workshops.

One of the participants left us with these words:

I love when I leave my room to do this play. It has a spiritual effect and we forget all of our sorrows. I'm not happy that the program is ending and I hope you come back.

Objective 4) Training trainers for program sustainability

Having trained the members of Simorgh Theatre, the group is now well-versed in a range of programming skills that can be applied to a variety of populations and situations:

- a) Developing a flexible curriculum of theatrical exercises that can be applied to the specific needs and issues of the incarcerated and their children.
- b) Experience in working closely with traumatized populations – adults, youth and children.
- c) Creating a professional performance and presenting it to diverse audiences, along with specific techniques for structured post-performance interactivities with an audience.
- d) Promoting the idea of theatrical training and storytelling as effective ways to transmit important information, engage people in problem-solving activities, and provide psychosocial assistance to a wide range of populations in need.
- e) Organizing and implementing complex programs which involve contacting officials for permission, maintaining records, organizing evaluations, and reporting to donors.

4. What challenges did you face in connection with this project? How did you address them?

1) Challenge: A primary challenge for our trainers was in understanding and coping with the intense emotional environment of the prison. Although the physical space provided for the

women in the prison and women's shelter was not unpleasant, the women are depressed and often suicidal. Therefore, attendance in the workshops fluctuated. Although the trainers aimed for continuity, they had to be flexible and patient with the women's mental states.

Response: The trainers often encouraged the women to just come and watch the workshop, knowing that those watching would inevitably join in. Once the women participated, they were always much happier and appreciative:

“You are so kind to us; other people don't care about us. You are like a dream to us.”

Given the women's daily challenges, the trainers were impressed with their steady progress, and had a core group of 12-15 women who participated every day. For these women, the workshops had a tremendous effect on their ability to cope, and the trainers were happy to give the women many hours of joy and release.

2) Challenge: In the Children Support Center, the trainers found it impossible to handle 82 children, all of whom were eager to join the program. The theatre group performed for the entire center, and gave one initial workshop for the whole group, but it quickly became apparent that they needed an ongoing solution.

Response: The staff selected a group of 45 children (17 boys and 28 girls) to participate. Some of the older girls were very shy, so they divided the group into smaller groups and the girls became much freer and open. The best part is that the students shared everything that they learned with the others, and the children's days became filled with new games and play acting, rather than fighting and general rowdiness.

3) Challenge: The trainers experienced difficulty with the staff and police, particularly at the Juvenile Correction Center. Every day the Manager, a woman, questioned them as though it was their first day. Although the counselors and teachers praised the program and noted its impact on the young women, the Manager remained difficult and aloof, never coming to observe the girls.

Response: The trainers remained pleasant and courteous throughout, recognizing that the Manager needed to feel in charge. The counselors and teachers made a point of describing the good work with the girls, and the positive effect on their morale and studies.

4) Challenge: The trainers were acutely aware that some of the women in the prison and shelter could be the wives of Taliban. They were afraid that the women's husbands or families might retaliate if they found out that their wives were learning exercises, games, sports, or acting. These activities, however healthy, are forbidden for women in very conservative areas. In addition, the trainers had to keep their activities from some of their own family members who might look unfavorably on their working with women in prison.

Response: The two trainers were diligent about their arrival and departure at the prison, always entering and leaving under the protection and watchful eye of the prison guards. The women in the prison were also highly protective of the trainers, Fariba and Masouma, and understood their concerns very well. The women bonded in a special way with the trainers.

5. Is your organization or program different than presented in the approved proposal? No

6. What were the most important lessons learned?

- We realize the critical need for active and expressive workshops in the prison and shelters. In the face of insurmountable circumstances, the women and their children crave positive, uplifting and personal expression.
- We clearly saw that the program visibly improved the mental outlook, and in some cases, the physical health, of many of the women and children.
- We discovered their intense need for physical exertion – sport, exercise, movement, dance – anything that expends energy. It stimulates chemical activity in the brain that makes people happier and more relaxed.

- We saw how valuable this work was for the children in the Support Center. Besides giving them an outlet to express themselves, it stimulated their imaginations and problem-solving abilities, and provided constructive ways to have fun together and with their mothers.
- The program gave many women a much needed self-confidence to face the outside world and reintegrate into society. They all reported feeling more confident and bold.

“I feel better when I am doing the theatre games and joining in these exercises. It makes me brave, and I feel I am a complete person and I am free.”

7. What has changed within your organization as a result of this project?

We appreciate the opportunity we had to work personally with incarcerated women and their children, and learn more about the Justice System in Afghanistan. Now we have experience with women in debilitating situations, and have trained others to continue these programs. We have learned new ways of reaching people who are in mental anguish, incarceration, and in desperate need of joyful expression and the freedom of play. We have seen the value of the program and understand how much the participants and directors all want the program to continue.

8. Describe the unexpected events and outcomes, including unexpected benefits.

At the beginning of the program, there was some anxiety in the trainers and other actors in Simorgh Theatre about working in prisons, juvenile detention centers, and with women who are deemed ‘criminals’. All of the actors in the program admitted that they were quite apprehensive at first. Yet when they got to know and understand the women more deeply, their anxiety dissipated. The program created an open space for imprisoned women to discuss their issues, as well as an open space for the trainers to understand themselves in a deeper way. Trainer Masouma Adell said:

‘When I first started, I was afraid of the prisoners and the prison, but when I faced the women and understood their problems, I became sympathetic and created a close relationship with them. I understand that they never had a chance to play with their families like I have.’

It was particularly surprising that our workshop was one of the few ways for the mothers and their children to be together. The mothers said that they didn’t know how to play with their children. We felt very happy that we could provide a space for that. We were happily surprised that the women, the Prison Director, the staff, and even the guards were calling so strongly for a continuation of the program. [See Testimonials attached].

9. Did you change your strategy as a result of obstacles you encountered? How will you address these challenges in the future?

Some adjustments were made to the original schedule outlined in our proposal, but the number of workshops remains the same. When creating our action plan, we expected that the Simorgh Theatre trainers would be able to facilitate workshops individually. This would have allowed them to teach at the Women’s Prison three times a week and the Juvenile Correction Center and the OMID Women’s Shelter twice a week each. We found that the trainers could not work alone or travel alone due to security issues. Women do not travel alone.

We addressed these issues by adding a program at the Child Support Center. When we first worked at the Prison in 2011, the children were housed with the women, and it would have been fine for the trainers to work separately within the same facility. Now, only the youngest children (under 7) are in the Prison and the older children are in another location. Reaching the children requires traveling to another facility.

We adjusted the schedule so that the trainers continued to facilitate workshops three times a week in the Herat Women's Prison but only once a week in three other locations: the Juvenile Correction Center, the OMID Women's Shelter, and the Child Support Center. Simorgh Theatre will still fulfilled their commitment of 136 total workshops.

10. Approximately how many lives have been touched, directly and indirectly, by the program?

We directed six women from the Simorgh Theatre in a play titled "The Backbiters," a story about a 13 year old girl who is about to be married against her will to an older man for a large sum of money. The six women play all the roles, including the male roles. We presented the play at each facility as a way to introduce the idea of story-telling and theatrical performance. Throughout the four facilities we reached approximately 400 women, children, youth and staff.

In total, the program reached over **500 people**, directly and indirectly, throughout the program, including members and students of Simorgh Theatre, facility guards, families of the imprisoned, Ministers and officials involved in the program, psychologists and social workers, members of other observing NGOs and human rights organizations, and a myriad of others.

11. What are the measurements used to monitor success; how was this information measured?

The trainers presented a Pre-Program Survey [attached] to the participants in each location, adapting the form and questions according to the variables in each location: levels of illiteracy among the women, ages of children, turnover in participants, etc. The same survey was again presented at the end as a Post-Program Survey to note changes in the participants' attitudes. The trainers took responsibility for quantitative measurement of attendance. The Program Coordinator from Simorgh Theatre, Mohammad Ahmadi, conducted interviews with local officials and Ministries to collect data, including interviews with the Managers of all four facilities.

Post-program, the Coordinator asked the Managers of the Prison and other facilities: Was the program useful or not? Do you want the program to continue? Did the workshops have a positive effect on the residents of their facility? [See Testimonies attached].

12. If the program is ongoing, provide plans and expected results, and projected timeframe.

The Creative Arts Prison Project is not currently ongoing. However, Bond Street Theatre and Simorgh Theatre are currently seeking funding to restart the program in the four facilities in Herat, and initiate the program in other women's facilities in Afghanistan.

13. Provide a detailed list of all expenses incurred during the grant cycle which have been paid for with the Dining for Women grant. [See attached Budget sheet]

14. Did this grant and relationship with DFW assist your organization in obtaining other funding, partnerships with other organizations, or public recognition in some capacity?

The DFW grant introduced the company to many opportunities for partnerships with other organizations, attention to the plight of women through our Newsletter articles, a feature article in the January 2015 issue of *American Theatre*, numerous media mentions, and the potential for further funding from organizations that recognize the success of the CAPP program, such as:

- *Women for Afghan Women*, the organization which runs the OMID Shelter for Women and the Child Support Center. This is our first official partnership on a project.
- The *Khaled Hosseini Foundation* has communicated interest in our programs for women.
- The *Open Society Foundation* has supported our projects in other countries and shown interest in our work in Afghanistan. Similarly with the *Aga Khan Foundation*.

- In Herat, we met and/or worked alongside the following groups: *War Child UK, Afghan Institute for Learning, Voice of Women Organization, Global Partners* (Embroidery and Tailoring programs), *Welfare Association for Development of Afghanistan* (Rug making), *Shelter Now International* (Gardening program), and especially the *Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission*.
